

1% Politics and the New Gilded Age

Rajan Menon looks at two recent scandals and what they show about the nexus between wealth and power in America.

By [Rajan Menon](#)

[TomDispatch.com](#)



Despair about the state of our politics pervades the political spectrum, from left to right. One source of it, the narrative of fairness offered in basic civics textbooks – we all have an equal opportunity to succeed if we work hard and play by the rules; citizens can truly shape our politics – no longer rings true to most Americans. Recent surveys indicate that substantial numbers of them believe that the [economy](#) and [political system](#) are both rigged. They also think that money has an [outsized influence](#) on politics. Ninety percent of Democrats hold this view, but so do 80 percent of Republicans. And [careful studies](#) confirm what the public believes.

None of this should be surprising given the stark economic inequality that now marks our society. The richest 1 percent of American households currently account for [40 percent](#) of the country's wealth, more than the bottom 90 percent of families possess. Worse yet, the top 0.1 percent has cornered about [20](#) percent of it, up from 7 percent in the mid-1970s. By contrast, the share of the bottom 90 percent has since then fallen from 35 percent to 25 percent. To put such figures in a personal light, in 2017, [three men](#) – Jeff Bezos, Warren Buffett, and Bill Gates – possessed more wealth (\$248.5 billion) than the bottom 50 percent of

Americans.

Over the last four decades, economic disparities in the U.S. increased substantially and are now greater than those in other wealthy democracies. The political consequence has been that a tiny minority of extremely wealthy Americans wields disproportionate influence, leaving so many others feeling disempowered.

What Money Sounds Like

Two recent headline-producing scandals highlight money's power in society and politics.

The first involved super-affluent parents who used their wealth to get their manifestly unqualified children into highly selective colleges and universities that previously had reputations (whatever the reality) for weighing the merits of applicants above their parents' wealth or influence.

The second concerned Texas Senator Ted Cruz's reported failure to reveal, as election laws require, more than \$1 million in low-interest loans that he received for his 2012 Senate campaign. (For that lapse, the Federal Election Commission (FEC) fined Senator Cruz a modest \$35,000.) The funds came from Citibank and Goldman Sachs, the latter his wife's longtime employer. News of those undisclosed loans, which also cast doubt on Cruz's claim that he had funded his campaign in part by liquidating the couple's assets, only added to the sense that favoritism now suffuses the politics of a country that once prided itself on being the world's model democracy. (Journalists covering the story couldn't resist pointing out that the senator had often lambasted

Wall Street's "crony capitalism" and excessive political influence.)

The Cruz controversy is just one reflection of the coming of 1 percent politics and 1 percent elections to America at a moment when the first billionaire has been ensconced in the Oval Office for more than two years, posing as a populist no less.

Since the Supreme Court's 2010 ruling in Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission, money has poured into politics as never before. That's because the Court ruled that no limits could be placed on corporate and union spending aimed at boosting or attacking candidates running for political office. Doing so, the justices determined in a 5-4 vote, would be tantamount to restricting individuals' right to free speech, protected by the First Amendment. Then came the Court's 2014 McCutcheon v. Federal Election Commission decision (again 5-4), which only increased money's influence in politics by removing the aggregate limit on an individual's contribution to candidates and to national party committees.

In an age when money drives politics, even ex-presidents are cashing in. Fifteen years after Bill Clinton departed the White House, he and Hillary had amassed a net worth of \$75 million – a 6,150 percent increase in their wealth. Barack and Michelle Obama's similarly soared from \$1.3 million in 2000 to \$40 million last year – and they're just warming up. Key sources of these staggering increases include sky-high speaking fees (often paid by large corporations), including \$153 million for the Clintons between February 2001 and May 2016. George W. Bush also made tens of

millions of dollars in this fashion and, in 2017, Obama received \$400,000 for a single speech to a Wall Street firm.

No wonder average Americans believe that the political class is disconnected from their day-to-day lives and that ours is, in practice, a democracy of the rich in which money counts (and counts and counts).

Cash for College

Now let's turn to what those two recent scandals tell us about the nexus between wealth and power in America.

First, the school scam. Parents have long hired pricey tutors to coach their children for the college admissions tests, sometimes paying them hundreds of dollars an hour, even \$1,500 for 90 minutes of high-class prep. They've also long tapped their exclusive social and political connections to gin up razzle-dazzle internships to embellish those college applications. Anyone who has spent as much time in academia as I have knows that this sort of thing has been going on for a long time. So has the practice of "legacy admissions" – access to elite schools especially for the kids of alumni of substantial means who are, or might prove to be, donors. The same is true of privileged access to elite schools for the kids of mega-donors. Consider, for instance, that \$2.5 million donation Charles Kushner made to Harvard in 1998, not long before his son Jared applied. Some of the folks who ran Jared's high school noted that he wasn't exactly a whiz-bang student or someone with sky-high SAT scores, but – surprise! – he was accepted anyway.

What's new about the recent revelations is that they show

the extent to which today's deep-pocketed helicopter parents have gone into overdrive, using brazen schemes to corrupt the college admissions process yet more. One unnamed parent spent a cool \$6.5 million to ensure the right college admitted his or her child. Others paid hefty amounts to get their kids' college admissions test scores falsified or even hired proxies to take the tests for them. Famous actors and financial titans made huge payments to university sports coaches, who then lied to admissions officers, claiming that the young applicants were champions they had recruited in sports like water polo, crew, or tennis. (The kids may have known how to swim, row, or play tennis, but star athletes they were not.)

Of course, as figures on the growing economic inequality in this country since the 1970s indicate, the overwhelming majority of Americans lack the connections or the cash to stack the deck in such ways, even assuming they would do so. Hence, the public outrage, even though parents generally understand that not every aspirant can get into a top school – there aren't enough spots – just as many know that their children's future happiness and sense of fulfillment won't depend on whether they attend a prestigious college or university.

Still, the unfairness and chicanery highlighted by the admissions scandal proved galling, the more so as the growing crew of fat cats corrupting the admissions process doubtless also preach the gospel of American meritocracy. Worse, most of their kids will undoubtedly present their fancy degrees as proof that quality wins out in our society, never mind that their starting blocks were placed so far

ahead of the competition.

To add insult to injury, the same parents and children may even portray admissions policies designed to help students who lack wealth or come from underrepresented communities as violations of the principles of equal opportunity and fairness, democracy's bedrock. In reality, students from low-income families, or even those of modest means, are startlingly less likely to be admitted to top private universities than those from households in the top 10 percent. In fact, applicants from families in the top 1 percent are now 77 times more likely than in the bottom 20 percent to land in an elite college, and 38 of those schools admit more kids from families in that top percentage than from the bottom 60 percent.

Buying Politics (and Politicians), American-Style

Now, let's return to the political version of the same – the world in which Ted Cruz swims so comfortably. There, too, money talks, which means that those wealthy enough to gain access to, and the attention of, lawmakers have huge advantages over others. If you want political influence, whether as a person or a corporation, having the wealth needed to make big campaign contributions – to individuals or groups – and to hire top-drawer lobbyists makes a world of difference.

Official data on the distribution of family income in the United States show that the overwhelming majority of Americans can't play that game, which remains the preserve of a tiny super-rich minority. In 2015, even with taxes and government-provided benefits included, households in the

lowest 20 percent accounted for only about 5 percent of total income. Their average income – not counting taxes and government-provided assistance – was only \$20,000. The share of the bottom 50 percent – families making \$61,372 or less – dropped from 20 percent to 12 percent between 1978 and 2015. By contrast, families in the top 1 percent earned nearly 50 percent of total income, averaging \$215,000 a year – and that's only income, not wealth. The super-rich have plenty of the latter, those in the bottom 20 percent next to none.

Before we proceed, a couple of caveats about money and political clout. Money doesn't always prevail. Candidates with more campaign funds aren't guaranteed victory, though the time politicians spend raising cash leaves no doubt that they believe it makes a striking difference. In addition, money in politics doesn't operate the way simple bribery does. The use of it in pursuit of political influence works more subtly, and often – in the new era opened by the Supreme Court – without the slightest need to violate the law.

Still, in Donald Trump's America, who would claim that money doesn't talk? If nothing else, from inaugural events – for Trump's inaugural \$107 million was raised from a host of wealthy donors with no limits on individual payments, 30 of which totaled \$1 million or more – to gala fundraisers, big donors get numerous opportunities to schmooze with those whose campaigns they've helped bankroll. Yes, there's a limit – currently \$5,600 – on how much any individual can officially give to a single election campaign, but the ultra-wealthy can simply put their money into organizations

formed solely to influence elections as well as into various party committees.

Individuals, companies, and organizations can, for instance, give money to political action committees (PACs) and Super PACs. Though bound by rules, both entities still have lots of leeway. PACs face no monetary limits on their independent efforts to shape elections, though they can't accept corporate or union money or take more than \$5,000 from individuals. They can provide up to \$5,000 to individual election campaigns and \$15,000 per party committee, but there's no limit on what they can contribute in the aggregate. Super PACs have far more running room. They can rake in unlimited amounts from a variety of sources (as long as they're not foreign) and, like PACs, can spend limitless sums to shape elections, providing they don't give money directly to candidates' campaigns.

Then there are the dark money groups, which can receive financial contributions from any source, American or foreign. Though their primary purpose is to push policies, not individual campaigns, they can engage in election-related work, provided that no more than half their funds are devoted to it. Though barred from donating to individual campaigns, they can pour unlimited money into Super PACs and, unlike PACs and Super PACs, don't have to disclose who gave them the money or how much. Between 2008 and 2018, dark money groups spent \$1 billion to influence elections.

In 2018, 2,395 Super PACs were working their magic in this country. They raised \$1.6 billion and spent nearly \$809 million. Nearly 78 percent of the money they received came from 100 donors. They, in turn, belonged to the wealthiest 1

percent, who provided 95 percent of what those Super PACs took in.

As the 2018 congressional elections kicked off, the four wealthiest Super PACs alone had \$113.4 million on hand to support candidates they favored, thanks in substantial measure to business world donors. In that election cycle, 31 individuals ponied up more than \$5 million apiece, while contributions from the top four among them ranged from almost \$40 million to \$123 million.

The upshot: if you're running for office and advocate policies disliked by wealthy individuals or by companies and organizations with lots of cash to drop into politics, you know from the get-go that you now have a problem.

Wealth also influences political outcomes through the lobbying industry. Here again, there are rules, but even so, vast numbers of lobbyists and eye-popping amounts of lobbying money now are at the heart of the American political system. In 2018 alone, the 50 biggest lobbying outfits, largely representing big companies, business associations, and banks, spent \$540 million, and the grand total for lobbying that year alone was \$3.4 billion.

Nearly 350 of those lobbyists were former legislators from Congress. Officials departing from senior positions in the executive branch have also found artful ways to circumvent presidential directives that prohibit them from working as lobbyists for a certain number of years.

Do unions and public interest groups also lobby? Sure, but there's no contest between them and corporations. Lee Drutman of the New America think tank notes that, for every

dollar the former spent in 2015, corporate donors spent \$34. Unsurprisingly, only one of the top 20 spenders on lobbying last year was a union or a public-interest organization.

The sums spent by individual companies to gain political influence can be breathtaking. Take now-embattled Boeing. It devoted \$15 million to lobbying in 2018 – and that’s not counting its campaign contributions, using various channels. Those added another \$8.4 million in the last two-and-a-half years. Yet Boeing only placed 11th among the top 20 corporate spenders on lobbying last year. Leading the pack: the U.S. Chamber of Commerce at \$94.8 million.

Defenders of the status quo will warn that substantially reducing money’s role in American politics is sure to threaten democracy and civil liberties by ceding undue power to the state and, horror of horrors, putting us on the road to “socialism,” the right wing’s bogeyman *du jour*. This is ludicrous. Other democracies have taken strong steps to prevent economic inequality from subverting their politics and haven’t become less free as a result. Even those democracies that don’t limit political contributions have adopted measures to curb the power of money, including bans on television ads (a huge expense for candidates in American elections: \$3 billion in 2018 alone just for access to local stations), free airtime to allow competitors to disseminate their messages, and public funds to ease the financial burden of election campaigns. Compared to other democracies, the United States appears to be in a league of its own when it comes to money’s prominence in politics.

Those who favor continuing business as usual like to point

out that federal “matching funds” exist to help presidential candidates not be steamrolled by competitors who’ve raised mounds of money. Those funds, however, do no such thing because they come with stringent limits on total spending. Candidates who accept matching funds for a general election cannot accept contributions from individuals. Moreover, matching funds are capped at \$20 million, which is a joke considering that Barack Obama and Mitt Romney spent a combined \$1.2 billion in individual contributions alone during the 2012 presidential election. (Super PACs spent another \$350 million to help Romney and \$100 million to back Obama.)

A New American Tradition?

Rising income inequality, wage stagnation, and slowing social mobility hurt ordinary Americans economically, even as they confer massive social and political advantages on the mega-rich – and not just when it comes to college admissions and politics either.

Even the *Economist*, a publication that can’t be charged with sympathy for left-wing ideas, warned recently of the threat economic inequality poses to the political agency of American citizens. The magazine cited studies showing that, despite everything you’ve heard about the power of small donations in recent political campaigns, 1 percent of the population actually provides a quarter of all the money spent on politics by individuals and 80 percent of what the two major political parties raise. Thanks to their wealth, a minuscule economic elite as well as big corporations now shape policies, notably on taxation and expenditure, to their advantage on an unprecedented scale. Polls show that

an overwhelming majority of Americans support stricter laws to prevent wealth from hijacking politics and want the *Citizens United* ruling overturned. But then just how much does the voice of the majority matter? Judging from the many failed efforts to pass such laws, not much.

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Consortium News' Record on Russia-gate—How CN Covered the 'Scandal': No. 4—'The Democratic Money Behind Russia-gate'

As Russia-gate continues to buffet the Trump administration, we now know that the "scandal" started with Democrats funding the original dubious allegations of Russian interference, wrote Joe Lauria on Oct. 29, 2017.

The Democratic Money Behind Russia-gate

By Joe Lauria

Special to Consortium News

The two sources that originated the allegations claiming

that Russia meddled in the 2016 election – without providing convincing evidence – were both *paid for* by the Democratic National Committee, and in one instance also by the Clinton campaign: the Steele dossier and the CrowdStrike analysis of the DNC servers. Think about that for a minute.

We have long known that the DNC did not allow the FBI to examine its computer server for clues about who may have hacked it – or even if it was hacked – and instead turned to CrowdStrike, a private company co-founded by a virulently anti-Putin Russian. Within a day, CrowdStrike blamed Russia on dubious evidence.

And, it has now been disclosed that the Clinton campaign and the DNC paid for opposition research memos written by former British MI6 intelligence agent Christopher Steele using hearsay accusations from anonymous Russian sources to claim that the Russian government was blackmailing and bribing Donald Trump in a scheme that presupposed that Russian President Vladimir Putin foresaw Trump's presidency years ago when no one else did.

Since then, the U.S. intelligence community has struggled to corroborate Steele's allegations, but those suspicions still colored the thinking of President Obama's intelligence chiefs who, according to Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, "hand-picked" the analysts who produced the Jan. 6 "assessment" claiming that Russia interfered in the U.S. election.

In other words, possibly all of the Russia-gate allegations, which have been taken on faith by Democratic partisans and members of the anti-Trump Resistance, trace back to claims

paid for or generated by Democrats.

If for a moment one could remove the sometimes justified hatred that many people feel toward Trump, it would be impossible to avoid the impression that the scandal may have been cooked up by the DNC and the Clinton camp in league with Obama's intelligence chiefs to serve political and geopolitical aims.

Absent new evidence based on forensic or documentary proof, we could be looking at a partisan concoction devised in the midst of a bitter general election campaign, a manufactured "scandal" that also has fueled a dangerous New Cold War against Russia; a case of a dirty political "oppor" serving American ruling interests in reestablishing the dominance over Russia that they enjoyed in the 1990s, as well as feeding the voracious budgetary appetite of the Military-Industrial Complex.

Though lacking independent evidence of the core Russia-gate allegations, the "scandal" continues to expand into wild exaggerations about the impact of a tiny number of social media pages suspected of having links to Russia but that apparently carried very few specific campaign messages. (Some pages reportedly were devoted to photos of puppies.)

'Cash for Trash'

Based on what is now known, Wall Street buccaneer Paul Singer paid for GPS Fusion, a Washington-based research firm, to do opposition research on Trump during the Republican primaries, but dropped the effort in May 2016 when it became clear Trump would be the GOP nominee. GPS Fusion has strongly denied that it hired Steele for this

work or that the research had anything to do with Russia.

Then, in April 2016 the DNC and the Clinton campaign paid its Washington lawyer Marc Elias to hire Fusion GPS to unearth dirt connecting Trump to Russia. This was three months before the DNC blamed Russia for hacking its computers and supposedly giving its stolen emails to WikiLeaks to help Trump win the election.

“The Clinton campaign and the Democratic National Committee retained Fusion GPS to research any possible connections between Mr. Trump, his businesses, his campaign team and Russia, court filings revealed this week,” *The New York Times* reported on Friday night.

So, linking Trump to Moscow as a way to bring Russia into the election story was the Democrats’ aim from the start.

Fusion GPS then hired ex-MI6 intelligence agent Steele, it says for the first time, to dig up that dirt in Russia for the Democrats. Steele produced classic opposition research, not an intelligence assessment or conclusion, although it was written in a style and formatted to look like one.

It’s important to realize that Steele was no longer working for an official intelligence agency, which would have imposed strict standards on his work and possibly disciplined him for injecting false information into the government’s decision-making. Instead, he was working for a political party and a presidential candidate looking for dirt that would hurt their opponent, what the Clintons used to call “cash for trash” when they were the targets.

Had Steele been doing legitimate intelligence work for his

government, he would have taken a far different approach. Intelligence professionals are not supposed to just give their bosses what their bosses want to hear. So, Steele would have verified his information. And it would have gone through a process of further verification by other intelligence analysts in his and perhaps other intelligence agencies. For instance, in the U.S., a National Intelligence Estimate requires vetting by all 17 intelligence agencies and incorporates dissenting opinions.

Instead Steele was producing a piece of purely political research and had different motivations. The first might well have been money, as he was being paid specifically for this project, not as part of his work on a government salary presumably serving all of society. Secondly, to continue being paid for each subsequent memo that he produced he would have been incentivized to please his clients or at least give them enough so they would come back for more.

Dubious Stuff

Opposition research is about getting dirt to be used in a mud-slinging political campaign, in which wild charges against candidates are the norm. This “oppo” is full of unvetted rumor and innuendo with enough facts mixed in to make it seem credible. There was so much dubious stuff in Steele’s memos that the FBI was unable to confirm its most salacious allegations and apparently refuted several key points.

Perhaps more significantly, the corporate news media, which was largely partial to Clinton, did not report the fantastic allegations after people close to the Clinton campaign began

circulating the lurid stories before the election with the hope that the material would pop up in the news. To their credit, established media outlets recognized this as ammunition against a political opponent, not a serious document.

Despite this circumspection, the Steele dossier was shared with the FBI at some point in the summer of 2016 and apparently became the basis for the FBI to seek Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act warrants against members of Trump's campaign. More alarmingly, it may have formed the basis for much of the Jan. 6 intelligence "assessment" by those "hand-picked" analysts from three U.S. intelligence agencies – the CIA, the FBI and the NSA – not all 17 agencies that Hillary Clinton continues to insist were involved. (Obama's intelligence chiefs, DNI Clapper and CIA Director John Brennan, publicly admitted that only three agencies took part and *The New York Times* printed a correction saying so.)

If in fact the Steele memos were a primary basis for the Russia collusion allegations against Trump, then there may be no credible evidence at all. It could be that because the three agencies knew the dossier was dodgy that there was no substantive proof in the Jan. 6 "assessment." Even so, a summary of the Steele allegations were included in a secret appendix that then-FBI Director James Comey described to then-President-elect Trump just two weeks before his inauguration.

Five days later, after the fact of Comey's briefing was leaked to the press, the Steele dossier was published in full by the sensationalist website BuzzFeed behind the

excuse that the allegations' inclusion in the classified annex of a U.S. intelligence report justified the dossier's publication regardless of doubts about its accuracy.

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Russian Fingerprints

The other source of blame about Russian meddling came from the private company CrowdStrike because the DNC blocked the FBI from examining its server after a suspected hack. Within a day, CrowdStrike claimed to find Russian "fingerprints" in the metadata of a DNC opposition research document, which had been revealed by an Internet site called DCLeaks, showing Cyrillic letters and the name of the first Soviet intelligence chief. That supposedly implicated Russia.

CrowdStrike also claimed that the alleged Russian intelligence operation was extremely sophisticated and skilled in concealing its external penetration of the server. But CrowdStrike's conclusion about Russian "fingerprints" resulted from clues that would have been left behind by extremely sloppy hackers or inserted intentionally to implicate the Russians.

CrowdStrike's credibility was further undermined when *Voice of America* reported on March 23, 2017, that the same software the company says it used to blame Russia for the

hack wrongly concluded that Moscow also had hacked Ukrainian government howitzers on the battlefield in eastern Ukraine.

“An influential British think tank and Ukraine’s military are disputing a report that the U.S. cyber-security firm CrowdStrike has used to buttress its claims of Russian hacking in the presidential election,” VOA reported. Dimitri Alperovitch, a CrowdStrike co-founder, is also a senior fellow at the anti-Russian Atlantic Council think tank in Washington.

More speculation about the alleged election hack was raised with WikiLeaks’ Vault 7 release, which revealed that the CIA is not beyond covering up its own hacks by leaving clues implicating others. Plus, there’s the fact that WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange has declared again and again that WikiLeaks did not get the Democratic emails from the Russians. Buttressing Assange’s denials of a Russian role, WikiLeaks associate Craig Murray, a former British ambassador to Uzbekistan, said he met a person connected to the leak during a trip to Washington last year.

And, William Binney, maybe the best mathematician to ever work at the National Security Agency, and former CIA analyst Ray McGovern have [published a technical analysis](#) of one set of Democratic email metadata showing that a transatlantic “hack” would have been impossible and that the evidence points to a likely leak by a disgruntled Democratic insider. Binney has further stated that if it were a “hack,” the NSA would have been able to detect it and make the evidence known.

Fueling Neo-McCarthyism

Despite these doubts, which the U.S. mainstream media has largely ignored, Russia-gate has grown into something much more than an election story. It has unleashed a neo-McCarthyite attack on Americans who are accused of being dupes of Russia if they dare question the evidence of the Kremlin's guilt.

Just weeks after last November's election, *The Washington Post* [published a front-page story](#) touting a blacklist from an anonymous group, called PropOrNot, that alleged that 200 news sites, including ***Consortiumnews.com*** and other leading independent news sources, were either willful Russian propagandists or "useful idiots."

Last week, a [new list](#) emerged with the names of over 2,000 people, mostly Westerners, who have appeared on RT, the Russian government-financed English-language news channel. The list was part of a report entitled, "The Kremlin's Platform for 'Useful Idiots' in the West," put out by an outfit called European Values, with a [long list](#) of European funders.

Included on the list of "useful idiots" absurdly are CIA-friendly Washington Post columnist David Ignatius; David Brock, Hillary Clinton's opposition research chief; and U.N. Secretary General Antonio Guterres.

The report stated: "Many people in Europe and the US, including politicians and other persons of influence, continue to exhibit troubling naïveté about RT's political agenda, buying into the network's marketing ploy that it is simply an outlet for independent voices marginalised by the mainstream Western press. These 'useful

idiots' remain oblivious to RT's intentions and boost its legitimacy by granting interviews on its shows and newscasts."

The intent of these lists is clear: to shut down dissenting voices who question Western foreign policy and who are usually excluded from Western corporate media. RT is often willing to provide a platform for a wider range of viewpoints, both from the left and right. American ruling interests fend off critical viewpoints by first suppressing them in corporate media and now condemning them as propaganda when they emerge on RT.

Geopolitical Risks

More ominously, the anti-Russia mania has increased chances of direct conflict between the two nuclear superpowers. The Russia-bashing rhetoric not only served the Clinton campaign, though ultimately to ill effect, but it has pushed a longstanding U.S.-led geopolitical agenda to regain control over Russia, an advantage that the U.S. enjoyed during the Yeltsin years in the 1990s.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Wall Street rushed in behind Boris Yeltsin and Russian oligarchs to asset strip virtually the entire country, impoverishing the population. Amid widespread accounts of this grotesque corruption, Washington intervened in Russian politics to help get Yeltsin re-elected in 1996. The political rise of Vladimir Putin after Yeltsin resigned on New Year's Eve 1999 reversed this course, restoring Russian sovereignty over its economy and politics.

That inflamed Hillary Clinton and other American hawks whose

desire was to install another Yeltsin-like figure and resume U.S. exploitation of Russia's vast natural and financial resources. To advance that cause, U.S. presidents have supported the eastward expansion of NATO and have deployed 30,000 troops on Russia's border.

In 2014, the Obama administration helped orchestrate a coup that toppled the elected government of Ukraine and installed a fiercely anti-Russian regime. The U.S. also undertook the risky policy of aiding jihadists to overthrow a secular Russian ally in Syria. The consequences have brought the world closer to nuclear annihilation than at any time since the Cuban missile crisis in 1962.

In this context, the Democratic Party-led Russia-gate offensive was intended not only to explain away Clinton's defeat but to stop Trump – possibly via impeachment or by inflicting severe political damage – because he had talked, insincerely it is turning out, about detente with Russia. That did not fit in well with the plan at all.

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Pelosi and McConnell Crank Up NATO Madness

Norman Solomon calls for all forms of pushback against a militarized political culture welcoming a NATO chief to

Congress this week.

By **Norman Solomon**

NormanSolomon.com



When House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell teamed up to invite NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg to address a joint session of Congress, they had every reason to expect the April 3 speech to be a big hit with U.S. media and political elites. The establishment is eager to affirm the sanctity of support for the transatlantic military alliance.

Huge reverence for NATO is matched by how dangerous NATO has become. NATO's continual expansion – [all the way to Russia's borders](#) – has significantly increased the chances that the world's two nuclear superpowers will get into direct military conflict.

But in the United States, when anyone challenges the continued expansion of NATO, innuendos or outright smears are likely.

Two years ago, when the Senate debated whether to approve bringing Montenegro into NATO, the mud flew at Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky after he showed up to object. An infuriated Sen. John McCain [declared](#) on the Senate floor: "I have no idea why anyone would object to this, except that I will say – if they object, they are now carrying out the desires and ambitions of Vladimir Putin, and I do not say that lightly."

Moments later, when Paul said "I object," McCain proclaimed: "The senator from Kentucky is now working for Vladimir

Putin.”

With those words, McCain conveyed the common madness of reverence for NATO – and the common intolerance for anything that might approach a rational debate on whether it’s a good idea to keep expanding an American-led military alliance to, in effect, push Russia into a corner. Doing so is understandably viewed from Russia as a dire threat. (Imagine a Russian-led military alliance expanding to Canada and Mexico, complete with some of the latest missile systems on the planet.)

Closing in on Russia

Ever since the fall of the Berlin Wall – and the quickly broken promises by the U.S. in 1990 that NATO would move “not one inch eastward” – NATO has been closing in on Russia’s borders while bringing one nation after another into full military membership. During the last three decades, NATO has added 13 countries – and it’s not done yet.

NATO members “have clearly stated that Georgia will become a member of NATO,” Stoltenberg asserted days ago while visiting the Georgian capital of Tbilisi. He added: “We will continue working together to prepare for Georgia’s NATO membership.” For good measure, he took to Twitter on March 25:

Delighted to observe the joint NATO-Georgia exercise with PM @BakhtadzeMamuka & honoured to meet veterans & serving soldiers. Georgia is a unique partner for #NATO & we are stepping up our cooperation. pic.twitter.com/RxlZsJaJCl

– Jens Stoltenberg (@jensstoltenberg) March 25, 2019

Very few members of Congress can be heard raising any concerns about such reckless expansion. The Senate is key, because adding a country to full NATO membership requires Senate approval.

My colleagues at RootsAction.org have just launched a constituent email campaign on this issue. In every state, people are contacting their senators with individual emails urging them to oppose NATO expansion. Such constituent pressure needs to escalate.

Lobbying is only part of what's needed. As NATO marks its 70th anniversary next week with a range of activities – including a White House welcome for Stoltenberg on Tuesday, his speech to Congress the next day and an official “celebration” on April 4 – counter-actions including forums and protests as part of a “No to NATO” week will be happening in Washington.

A statement from the campaign says:

“NATO and a just, peaceful and sustainable world are incompatible... It is an unjust, undemocratic, violent and aggressive alliance trying to shape the world for the benefit of a few.”

Such evaluations of NATO in the real world are a far cry from the adulation that will be coming from mass media next week.

President Donald Trump's decision to roll out the White House red carpet for NATO's secretary general is consistent with the administration's actions during the last two years.

Media narratives that fixate on occasional warm rhetoric from Trump about Russian President Vladimir Putin have fueled illusions that Trump isn't pursuing aggressive anti-Russian policies.

While many Democratic politicians and U.S. media outlets have portrayed Trump as soft on Russia and uncommitted to Western militarism, such claims don't hold up to facts. Trump and his top deputies have repeatedly affirmed a commitment to NATO, while his overall policies (if not always his rhetoric) have been dangerously bellicose toward Russia.

In an email message to the D.C. area encouraging participation in ["No to NATO"](#) events next week, RootsAction points out:

"Trump has evicted Russian diplomats, sanctioned Russian officials, put missiles practically on Russia's border, sent weapons into Ukraine, lobbied European nations to drop Russian energy deals, left the Iran agreement, torn up the INF Treaty, rejected Russia's offers on banning weapons in space and banning cyberwar, expanded NATO eastward, added a NATO partner in Colombia, proposed adding Brazil, demanded and successfully moved most NATO members to buy significantly more weapons, splurged on more nukes, bombed Russians in Syria, overseen the largest war rehearsals in Europe in half a century, condemned all proposals for a European military and insisted that Europe stick with NATO."

When NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg gives his speech to the assembled members of Congress next Wednesday, you can count on the House speaker and Senate majority leader to be

right behind him. The bipartisan enthusiasm will be obvious – in tribute to a militarized political culture that is vastly profitable for a few, while vastly destructive in countless ways. Only public education, activism, protests and a wide range of political organizing have the potential to disrupt and end the reflexive support for NATO in Washington.

Norman Solomon is cofounder and national coordinator of RootsAction.org. He was a Bernie Sanders delegate from California to the 2016 Democratic National Convention and is currently a coordinator of the relaunched Bernie Delegates Network. Solomon is the author of a dozen books, including “War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death.” He is the executive director of the Institute for Public Accuracy.

Consortium News’ Record on Russia-gate—How CN Covered the ‘Scandal’: No. 3—‘The Tangled Threads of Russia-gate’

Once a Washington groupthink takes hold, as it has in the fervent belief about Russia-gate, respect for facts and logic fly out the window since all these important people can’t be wrong, wrote Robert Parry on Dec. 5, 2017.

The Tangled Threads of

Russia-gate

By Robert Parry

Special to Consortium News

A curious feature about the Russia-gate “scandal” is that its proponents ignore the growing number of moments when their evidence undercuts their narrative. Instead, they press ahead toward a predetermined destination in much the way that true-believing conspiracy theorists are known to do.

For instance, *The New York Times* ran [a story](#) on Monday, entitled “Operative Offered Trump Campaign Access to Putin,” detailing how a conservative operative “told a Trump adviser that he could arrange a back-channel meeting between Donald J. Trump and Vladimir V. Putin, the Russian president, according to an email sent to the Trump campaign” – and apparently described to the Times by a helpful source on Capitol Hill.

The *Times* quoted the email from National Rifle Association member Paul Erickson to Trump campaign adviser Rick Dearborn as saying, “Putin is deadly serious about building a good relationship with Mr. Trump. ... [Putin] wants to extend an invitation to Mr. Trump to visit him in the Kremlin before the election.”

An NRA conference in Louisville, Kentucky, was supposed to be the location for the “first contact” between the Russians and the Trump campaign, according to the email.

The *Times* treated its new information as further

confirmation of nefarious connections between the Trump campaign and the Russian government. Immediately after introducing this May 2016 email, which had the subject line, "Kremlin Connection," the Times reprised the background of former FBI Director Robert Mueller conducting a special-prosecutor investigation into "Russian interference in the election and possible collusion with the Trump campaign."

Note how the *Times*' reference to "Russian interference" was treated as flat fact although the *Times* still hedges on "possible collusion" between the Kremlin and the Trump campaign. Like much of the U.S. mainstream media, the *Times* no longer bothers to use "alleged" in front of "Russian interference" even though no solid evidence of a coordinated Kremlin effort has been presented.

But there is a bigger problem with this "scoop": If the Russia-gate narrative were correct – that the Kremlin had identified Trump years earlier as a likely U.S. president and undertook a multi-year campaign to bribe and blackmail him to be Moscow's Manchurian candidate or Putin's "puppet" as Hillary Clinton charged – the Russians wouldn't need some little-known "conservative operative" to serve as an intermediary in May 2016 to set up a back-channel meeting.

The Contradiction

In other words, assuming that the *Times*' story is correct, the email suggests the opposite of the impression that the *Times* wants its readers to get. The email is either meaningless in that it led to no actual meeting or it contradicts the storyline about a longstanding Russian operation to plant a patsy in the White House.

Times reporter Nicholas Fandos noted that it was unclear what Dearborn did in response to this overture, although the *Times* reported that Dearborn had forwarded a similar proposal by Christian conservative activist Rick Clay to Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner, who rebuffed the offer.

On Monday, I read the rest of the *Times* email story looking for some acknowledgement of the problems with its implied scenario, but found none. Fandos made references to other low-level efforts by Russians to make contact with Trump's advisers (without noticeable success, I might add), but again these examples actually run counter to the image of Trump as the Kremlin's prized chump.

If Putin had several years ago foreseen what no one else did – that Trump would become the U.S. president – then these ad hoc contacts with members of Trump's entourage in 2016 would not have been needed.

The *Times*' scoop parallels the story of the plea deal that Russia-gate prosecutors struck with low-level Trump foreign policy adviser George Papadopoulos who admitted lying about his contacts with an obscure academic in Stirling, Scotland, who supposedly offered to be another intermediary between Trump's team and the Kremlin.

According to court documents, Papadopoulos, a 30-year-old campaign aide, got to know a professor of international relations who claimed to have "substantial connections with Russian government officials," with the professor identified in press reports as Joseph Mifsud, who is associated with the University of Stirling.

The first contact between Mifsud and Papadopoulos supposedly

occurred in mid-March 2016 in Italy, with a second meeting in London on March 24 when the professor purportedly introduced Papadopoulos to a Russian woman whom the young campaign aide believed to be Putin's niece, an assertion that Mueller's investigators determined wasn't true.

Trump, who then was under pressure for not having a foreign policy team, included Papadopoulos as part of a list drawn up to fill that gap, and Papadopoulos participated in a campaign meeting on March 31 in Washington at which he suggested a meeting between Trump and Putin, a prospect that other senior aides reportedly slapped down.

In other words, at least based on the reporting about the Dearborn email and the Papadopoulos overture, there is no reason to believe that Trump was colluding with Moscow or had any significant relationship at all.

If these developments point to anything, it is to the opposite; that Russia was fishing for some contacts with what – however implausibly – was starting to look like a possible future U.S. president, but with whom they were not well-connected.

Gotcha Moments

There have been similar problems with other Russia-gate “gotcha” moments, such as disclosures of a possible Trump hotel deal in Moscow with Mikhail Fridman of Russia's Alfa Bank. Though Trump's presumed financial tie-ins to Russian oligarchs close to Putin were supposed to be fundamental to the Russia-gate narrative, the outcome of the hotel deal turned out to be a big nothing.

One source knowledgeable about the proposed deal told me it fell apart because Trump was willing to put little on the table beyond the branding value of the Trump name. However, if Putin were actually trying to buy Trump's loyalty, money presumably would have been no obstacle. Indeed, you would think that the more money used to line Trump's pockets the better. But the hotel deal collapsed; there is no Trump hotel in Moscow.

Other Russia-gate cases are equally disconnected from what had been the original narrative about senior Russians spending years cultivating Trump as their Manchurian candidate.

The accusations against Trump's onetime campaign chief Paul Manafort focus on his alleged failure to report income from – and pay taxes on – work that he did for the elected government of Ukraine before any involvement in the Trump campaign.

Last week's guilty plea from former National Security Adviser Michael Flynn related to purportedly false statements and omissions that he made when questioned by FBI agents about calls to Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak during the transition, i.e., after Trump had been elected.

Despite the breathless coverage on MSNBC and the *Times*' excited headlines about how the "inquiry grows," there remain other core problems for the narrative. No matter how often the U.S. mainstream media asserts the suspicion of Russian "hacking" of Democratic emails as flat fact, no solid proof has yet been presented – and the claim has been denied by both the Russian government and WikiLeaks, which

published the key emails.

Sleight of Hand

The *Times* and other mainstream media outlets play their sleight of hand on this key point by asserting that “U.S. intelligence agencies” have “concluded” that Russian intelligence services “hacked” the emails from the Democratic National Committee and Clinton’s campaign chief John Podesta, but that summary ignores the specifics.

First of all, by using this summary of the facts, the *Times* and other outlets continue to give the false impression that all 17 U.S. intelligence agencies concurred in the conclusion, a false claim that Hillary Clinton and the mainstream press have asserted over and over, although it is now clear that no such consensus ever existed.

Former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper testified that the Jan. 6 report on alleged Russian interference was produced by “hand-picked” analysts from only three organizations: the FBI, CIA and National Security Agency.

And, even those “hand-picked” analysts stipulated that they were not asserting Russian guilt as fact but only as their best guess. They included the disclaimer: “Judgments are not intended to imply that we have proof that shows something to be a fact. Assessments are based on collected information, which is often incomplete or fragmentary, as well as logic, argumentation, and precedents.”

Even *New York Times* reporter Scott Shane initially noted the absence of evidence, writing: “What is missing from the

public report is what many Americans most eagerly anticipated: hard evidence to back up the agencies' claims that the Russian government engineered the election attack. ... Instead, the message from the agencies essentially amounts to 'trust us.'"

Former senior U.S. intelligence officials, including the NSA's ex-technical director William Binney, have raised further doubts about whether a "hack" occurred. Binney conducted tests on download speeds and determined that the extraction of one known batch of Democratic emails was not possible over the Internet, but did match the speed of a USB download onto a thumb drive, suggesting a leak from a Democratic insider.

So, rather than the many disparate strings of Russia-gate coming neatly together more than a year after last year's election, the various threads either are becoming hopelessly tangled or flying off in different directions.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s.

Three Lessons From 'Failed' Mueller Inquiry

Jonathan Cook analyzes what progressives can glean from a major squabble between different wings of the same neoliberal establishment.

By JonathanCook



Here are three important lessons for the progressive left to consider now that it is clear the inquiry by Special Counsel Robert Mueller into Russia-gate is never going to uncover collusion between Donald Trump's camp and the Kremlin in the 2016 presidential election.

No. 1: Painting the Pig's face

The left never had a dog in this race. This was always an in-house squabble between different wings of the establishment. Late-stage capitalism is in terminal crisis, and the biggest problem facing our corporate elites is how to emerge from this crisis with their power intact. One wing wants to make sure the pig's face remains painted, the other is happy simply getting its snout deeper into the trough while the food lasts.

Russia-gate was never about substance, it was about who gets to image-manage the decline of a turbo-charged, self-harming neoliberal capitalism.

The leaders of the Democratic Party are less terrified of Trump and what he represents than they are of us and what we might do if we understood how they have rigged the political and economic system to their permanent advantage.

For them, it may look like Russia-gate was a failure, but it was actually a success. It deflected the left's attention from endemic corruption within the leadership of the Democratic Party, which supposedly represents the left. It diverted the left's political energies towards the

convenient bogeymen targets of Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin.

What Mueller found – all he was ever going to find – was marginal corruption in the Trump camp. And that was inevitable because Washington is mired in corruption. In fact, what Mueller revealed was the most exceptional forms of corruption among Trump's team while obscuring the run-of-the-mill stuff that would have served as a reminder of the endemic corruption infecting the Democratic leadership too.

An anti-corruption investigation would have run much deeper and exposed far more. It would have highlighted the Clinton Foundation, and the role of mega-donors such as James Simons, George Soros and Haim Saban who funded Hillary's campaign with one aim in mind: to get their issues into a paid-for national "consensus."

Further, in focusing on the Trump camp – and relative minnows such as Paul Manafort and Roger Stone – the Russia-gate inquiry actually served to shield the Democratic leadership from an investigation into the much worse corruption revealed in the content of the Democratic National Committee emails. It was the leaking / hacking of those emails that provided the rationale for Mueller's investigations. What should have been at the front and center of any inquiry was how the Democratic Party sought to rig its primaries to prevent party members selecting anyone but Hillary as their presidential candidate.

So, in short, Russia-gate has been two years of wasted energy by the left, energy that could have been spent both targeting Trump for what he is really doing rather than what

it is imagined he has done, and targeting the Democratic leadership for its own, equally corrupt practices.

No. 2: Trump Empowered

But it's far worse than that. It is not just that the left wasted two years of political energy on Russia-gate. At the same time, it empowered Trump, breathing life into his phony arguments that he is the anti-establishment president, a people's president the elites are determined to destroy.

Trump faces opposition from within the establishment not because he is "anti-establishment" but because he refuses to decorate the pig's snout with lipstick. He is tearing the mask off late-stage capitalism's greed and self-destructiveness. And he is doing so not because he wants to reform or overthrow turbo-charged capitalism but because he wants to remove the last, largely cosmetic constraints on the system so that he and his friends can plunder with greater abandon – and destroy the planet more quickly.

The other wing of the neoliberal establishment, the one represented by the Democratic Party leadership, fears that exposing capitalism in this way – making explicit its inherently brutal, wrist-slitting tendencies – will awaken the masses, that over time it will risk turning them into revolutionaries. Democratic Party leaders fear Trump chiefly because of the threat he poses to the image of the political and economic system they have so lovingly crafted so that they can continue enriching themselves and their children.

Trump's genius – his only genius – is to have appropriated, and misappropriated, some of the language of the left to advance the interests of the 1 percent. When he attacks the

corporate “liberal” media for having a harmful agenda, for serving as propagandists, he is not wrong. When he rails against the identity politics cultivated by “liberal” elites over the past two decades – suggesting that it has weakened the U.S. – he is not wrong. But he is right for the wrong reasons.

The corporate media, and the journalists they employ, are propagandists – for a system that keeps them wealthy. When Trump was a Republican primary candidate, the entire corporate media loved him because he was TV’s equivalent of clickbait, just as he had been since reality TV began to usurp the place of current affairs programs and meaningful political debate.

The handful of corporations that own the U.S. media – and much of corporate America besides – are there both to make ever-more money by expanding profits and to maintain the credibility of a political and economic system that lets them make ever more money.

The “liberal” corporate media shares the values of the Democratic Party leadership. In other words, it is heavily invested in making sure the pig doesn’t lose its lipstick. By contrast, Fox News and the shock-jocks, such as Trump, prioritize making money in the short term over the long-term credibility of a system that gives them license to make money. They care much less whether the pig’s face remains painted.

So Trump is right that the “liberal” media is undemocratic and that it is now propagandizing against him. But he is wrong about why. In fact, all corporate media – whether

“liberal” or not, whether against Trump or for him – is undemocratic. All of the media propagandizes for a rotten system that keeps the vast majority of Americans impoverished. All of the media cares more for Trump and the elites he belongs to than it cares for the 99 percent.

Similarly, with identity politics. Trump says he wants to make (a white) America great again, and uses the left’s obsession with identity as a way to energize a backlash from his own supporters.

Just as too many on the left sleep-walked through the past two years waiting for Mueller – a former head of the FBI, the U.S. secret police, for chrissakes! – to save them from Trump, they have been manipulated by liberal elites into the political cul-de-sac of identity politics.

Just as Mueller put the left on standby – into waiting-for-the-Messiah mode – so simple-minded, pussy-hat-wearing identity politics has been cultivated in the supposedly liberal bastions of the corporate media and Ivy League universities – the same universities that have turned out generations of Muellers and Clintons – to deplete the left’s political energies. While we argue over who is most entitled and most victimized, the establishment has carried on raping and pillaging Third World countries, destroying the planet and siphoning off the wealth produced by the rest of us.

These liberal elites long ago worked out that if we could be made to fight among ourselves about who was most entitled to scraps from the table, they could keep gorging on the main course.

The “liberal” elites exploited identity politics to keep us

divided by pacifying the most marginalized with the offer of a few additional crumbs. Trump has exploited identity politics to keep us divided by inflaming tensions as he reorders the hierarchy of “privilege” in which those crumbs are offered. In the process, both wings of the elite have averted the danger that class consciousness and real solidarity might develop and start to challenge their privileges.

No. 3: The Corbyn Experience

But the most important lesson of all for the left is that support among its ranks for the Mueller inquiry against Trump was foolhardy in the extreme.

Not only was the inquiry doomed to failure – in fact, not only was it designed to fail – but it has set a precedent for future politicized investigations that will be used against the progressive left should it make any significant political gains. And an inquiry against the real left will be far more aggressive and far more “productive” than Mueller was.

If there is any doubt about that look to the U.K. Britain now has within reach of power the first truly progressive politician in living memory, someone seeking to represent the 99 per cent, not the 1 percent. But Jeremy Corbyn’s experience as the leader of the Labour Party – massively swelling the membership’s ranks to make it the largest political party in Europe – has been eye-popping.

I have documented Corbyn’s travails regularly in this blog over the past four years at the hands of the British political and media establishment. You can find many

examples [here](#).

Corbyn, even more so than the small, new wave of insurgency politicians in the U.S. Congress, has faced a relentless barrage of criticism from across the U.K.'s similarly narrow political spectrum. He has been attacked by both the rightwing media and the supposedly "liberal" media. He has been savaged by the ruling Conservative Party, as was to be expected, and by his own parliamentary Labour Party. The U.K.'s two-party system has been exposed as just as hollow as the one in the U.S.

The ferocity of the attacks has been necessary because, unlike the Democratic Party's success in keeping a progressive left-winger away from the presidential campaign, the U.K. system accidentally allowed a socialist to slip past the gatekeepers. All hell has broken out ever since.

What is so noticeable is that Corbyn is rarely attacked over his policies – mainly because they have wide popular appeal. Instead he has been hounded over fanciful claims that, despite being a life-long and very visible anti-racism campaigner, he suddenly morphed into an outright anti-Semite the moment party members elected him leader.

I will not reprise again how implausible these claims are. Simply look through these [previous blog posts](#) should you be in any doubt.

But what is amazing is that, just as with the Mueller inquiry, much of the British left – including prominent figures like Owen Jones and the supposedly countercultural Novara Media – have sapped their political energies in trying to placate or support those leading the preposterous

claims that Labour under Corbyn has become “institutionally anti-Semitic.” Again, the promotion of a simple-minded identity politics – which pits the rights of Palestinians against the sensitivities of Zionist Jews about Israel – was exploited to divide the left.

The more the left has conceded to this campaign, the angrier, the more implacable, the more self-righteous Corbyn’s opponents have become – to the point that the Labour Party is now in serious danger of imploding.

Were the U.S. to get its own Corbyn as president, he or she would undoubtedly face a Mueller-style inquiry, and one far more effective at securing the president’s impeachment than this one was ever going to be.

That is not because a leftwing U.S. president would be more corrupt or more likely to have colluded with a foreign power. As the U.K. example shows, it would be because the entire media system – from *The New York Times* to *Fox News* – would be against such a president. And as the U.K. example also shows, it would be because the leaderships of both the Republican and Democratic parties would work as one to finish off such a president.

In the combined success-failure of the Mueller inquiry, the left has an opportunity to understand in a much more sophisticated way how real power works and in whose favor it is exercised. It is a moment that should be clarifying – if we are willing to open our eyes to Mueller’s real lessons.

Jonathan Cook is a freelance journalist based in Nazareth. He blogs at <https://www.jonathan-cook.net/blog/>.

A Prediction 3 Days Before the 2016 Election on How the Democrats Would Use Russia-gate to Try to Depose Trump

Consortium News Editor Joe Lauria predicted on Nov. 5, 2016 that should Clinton lose, the Democrats would blame Russia to try to remove Trump from office, even without evidence. It was the birth of Russia-gate.

Joe Lauria wrote that if Hillary Clinton lost to Donald Trump the Democrats would blame Russia, even without evidence, and on that basis try to get the Electoral College or Congress to overturn the results of the election. In fact the Democrats tried these tactics but failed on both counts. Yet for two and a half years they obsessively tried to keep the Russia-gate narrative alive to undermine or depose Trump.

Hillary Clinton's Ace-in-the-Hole: Russia

By [Joe Lauria](#)

[The Huffington Post](#)

Nov. 5, 2016

If Hillary Clinton loses a very tight election her ace-in-the-hole could be Russia.

Corporate media reacted harshly when [Donald Trump](#) said in the last debate that he would wait and see what happens

before accepting the election results. "I will keep you in suspense," he said. Trump has alleged that the vote will be rigged.

If Trump loses by a razor thin margin we can expect a demand for recounts and possible legal challenges. Some of his more violent supporters have also threatened trouble.

But what if Clinton loses a close election? In the wake of Wikileaks and FBI revelations Clinton's sizable lead has evaporated and a tight result is looking more and more possible.

On her campaign plane a few hours after the last debate Clinton was asked if she would pledge to accept the results. She ignored the question and instead launched into an attack on what Trump had said.

If Clinton should lose a squeaker, she has two options to try to overturn the election and make herself president—and both involve blaming Russia. She can try to influence America's bizarre electoral college system, or get at least two allies in Congress to challenge its certification of the election.

America's Indirect Suffrage

Unknown to most people outside the United States, and to many within, the U.S. president is not chosen by a national popular vote. Instead the U.S. presidential election is really 50 separate state elections. The candidate that wins

a state's popular vote is awarded a number of electors based on population size.

These are actual persons who vote for president on behalf of the people. Slates of electors are chosen by both major political parties before the election. Whichever party wins a state's popular vote gets the votes of that state's electors. There are 538 electors and a candidate must get 270 electoral votes to be elected president. *

This system ignores the national popular vote so that a candidate may win more votes nationwide but still lose the election. It has happened four times, the last being in 2000 when Al Gore won the popular vote but lost the election to George W. Bush.

Several states, such as New York and California, usually vote Democratic, while others, such as many in the West and South, are normally in the Republican column. But there are states that could go either way, so-called swing states, and that's where the most intense campaigning takes place.

According to one scenario, the four electoral votes in Maine could decide this election.

That's why Trump campaigned there last week. Maine and Nebraska are the only two states that proportion some of their electors. One candidate could get one of the four electoral votes if he or she wins a congressional district.

Influencing the College by Blaming Russia

The Clinton camp's accusation after the first WikiLeaks revelations, just before the Democratic Convention, that Russian intelligence was behind the leak was later amplified in early October by James Clapper, director of national intelligence, who blamed "Russia's senior-most officials" for intending to "interfere with the U.S. election process" by authorizing the hack of the Democratic National Committee.

Clapper went significantly further, however, claiming that a Russian company was behind attempted hacks of electoral computer systems in various states.

The Obama administration's claim was widely accepted by the news media even though no evidence of Russian tampering was publicly given. With just days to go to the election the story has been revived by the pro-Clinton media. CNN Anchor Jake Tapper on Friday incorrectly said the U.S. was accusing the Russian government, not a company, of threatening election computers.

In the last debate, Clinton said the hack "has come from the highest levels of the Russian government. Clearly from Putin himself in an effort, as 17 of our intelligence agencies have confirmed, to influence our election." The 17 agencies were represented by Clapper. Clinton also offered no evidence.

If Clinton loses by a few electoral votes she could challenge the results by claiming that Russia tampered with the election. The public has been prepared with unproven allegations that are widely disseminated by corporate media

and widely believed. With the media not previously demanding evidence of such a claim and if the intelligence agencies back her up, her only challenge might be to convince the needed number of Republican electors to change their votes to put her over the top.

There are only 26 states that require electors by law to vote for the candidate who won the state's popular vote. Virginia has issued only an advisory to do so. The other 24 states have no such laws, freeing electors to vote their conscience and against their own party.

The swing state with the most electoral votes that doesn't bind its electors by law is Pennsylvania, with 20 electoral votes. Other states in play such as Arizona, Utah, Texas, Georgia, North Carolina, Nevada and New Hampshire also have no laws to keep an elector from changing his or her vote. Ohio and Florida, the two biggest swing states, do bind the electors by law.

Clinton's camp would be faced with turning a number of electors around to vote against the Republican candidate and switch their vote to her. Clinton has to convince them that a changed vote would uphold American democracy against the interference of a supposedly hostile state that threw the election for Trump.

Clinton has to convince such so-called "Faithless Electors" to vote against their state's popular will. This has happened in seven previous elections. In each of them only one elector changed his or her vote. This occurred in 1948,

1956, 1960, 1968, 1972, 1976, and 1988. But no Faithless Elector has ever decided a presidential election before.

The 2016 Election, one of the strangest in memory, could add to the craziness by becoming the first.

The Second Option

If she fails to convince enough electors to change their votes there is one last chance for Clinton. At 1 p.m. on January 6, both houses of Congress meet to certify the election. However, an 1887 law allows any member of Congress to formally object to the result.

An objection must be put in writing and signed by at least one Senator and one Representative. The Joint Session is recessed and both Houses have two hours to separately consider the objection. Then each House votes on it. If both agree, the electoral votes are not counted.

There have only been two objections and both times, in 1969 and 2005, they were rejected.

If Clinton succeeds and the objections are accepted, vacating Trump's electoral votes because of alleged Russian interference in certain states, it could bring him below the required 270 electoral votes. But it would not give Clinton that number either.

If neither candidate reaches 270 electoral votes the Constitution says the election is decided by a vote in the

House of Representatives. Each state delegation gets one vote and a simple majority is required. The House is currently controlled by the Republicans. But many Republicans do not support Trump.

The House has decided a presidential election only two times before. In 1800 Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr tied with 73 electoral votes each. After 36 ballots over six days, the House chose Jefferson as the third president. In the 1824 election Andrew Jackson received 99 electoral votes, 32 short of a majority, to John Quincy Adams's 85, but the House chose Adams.

It would certainly be a long shot for Clinton to try either of these tactics to overturn a close loss to Trump. But given everything else that has happened in this election campaign, would anyone really be surprised?

*The system was a compromise between Congress and voters (at first only propertied white men) selecting the president. It also gave less populated Southern slave states a greater say in a presidential election. It was established in 1789, at a time when the Holy Roman Emperor was chosen by an electoral college. From 1849 to 1918 Prussian voters chose electors to decide on deputies for the House of Representatives in a system of indirect suffrage. The French and Irish Senates are today chosen by an electoral college. The Pope is still elected by a College of Cardinals.

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PATRICK LAWRENCE: Why the Dust Won't Settle After Mueller's Report

It won't be "full and thorough" and Democrats will continue to look for political payoff from Russia-gate, writes Patrick Lawrence.

By [Patrick Lawrence](#)

Special to Consortium News



Last week gave us mounting indications that Robert Mueller has finished his two-year probe into alleged Russian interference in the 2016 elections and is about to issue his long-awaited report.

But those who hope to read the results of the "full and thorough investigation" promised when Mueller was appointed special counsel should adjust their expectations. After [spending](#) upward of \$12 million, Mueller is almost certain to hand Attorney General William Barr a light-on-evidence document that dodges many more questions than it resolves. Neither is it clear whether the AG will make all, part, or none of the Mueller report public.

There are two certainties we can rely upon as we await Mueller's final word, none a cause for relief.

- The special counsel's office did not undertake a

credible investigation of the two core charges related to the 2016 elections—that Russian intelligence hacked Democratic National Committee email servers while colluding with Donald Trump as he sought the presidency. Mueller failed to call numerous key witnesses, and failed to pursue alternative theories, a duty of any investigator in Mueller’s position. These omissions are more or less fatal to the legitimacy of Mueller’s work.

- Among the mainstream Democrats who have incessantly hyped the “Russia-wrecked-our-elections” story, there is no remorse for the damage it has done to our governing institutions, our foreign policy, and our national security. Russia-gate has consolidated Cold War II. The chance to rebuild mutually beneficial relations with Moscow has been damaged.

Sequence of Events

There is a sequence of events leading up to the completed Mueller report that is important to follow. Earlier this month the House Judiciary Committee announced that it has requested documents from 81—yes, 81—government agencies, entities such as *Wikileaks*, and (mostly) individuals. These last include the president’s two sons, Eric and Donald Trump Jr.; Jared Kushner, his son-in-law; Allen Weisselberg, the Trump Organization’s chief financial officer; former AG Jeff Sessions, and former White House Counsel Douglas McGahn.

The committee purports to be looking for obstructions of justice, collusion with Russia, and other possible transgressions—this after Mueller spent two years investigating the same things. It is not hard to read this for what it is: the first indication that the Democrat-

controlled House wants enough grist to keep the post-Mueller Russia-gate mill running for its political advantage.

“Russia-gate,” in short, is not about to pass into history. It looks now as if this political spectacle will be sustained as long as President Trump remains in office.

Numerous other signs that Mueller is folding his tent have followed. Various members of his investigative team have either left or will do so soon. Last week Mueller relieved Michael Flynn, once and briefly Trump’s national security adviser, of further questioning. A federal judge then gave Paul Manafort, Trump’s one-time campaign manager, his final sentence: He gets seven and a half years in prison on financial fraud charges. This now looks like the biggest fish Mueller has caught—and never mind that Manafort’s crimes had nothing to do with either the Trump campaign or allegations of Russian interference.

Last Thursday the House voted 420–0 (with four abstentions) to back a resolution calling for Justice to make the full Mueller report public once it goes to Barr’s office. “Mission accomplished” is the only way to read all this. Now what?

It is not yet clear what Justice will do with Mueller’s report. In the Republican-controlled Senate, Majority Leader Mitch McConnell is not saying whether he will back a make-it-public vote. He blocked a bipartisan resolution similar to the House’s earlier this year. Barr is obliged only to show some of what is in the Mueller report to the House and Senate Judiciary Committees.

For his part, Trump has been all over the place as to what

Barr should do. Last Friday he insisted Mueller “should never have been appointed and there should be no Mueller report.” A day later the president claimed he told House Republicans to back the make-it-public resolution, as they did. “Makes us all look good and it doesn’t matter,” the president said in a Twitter message Saturday.

The Mueller report is in for endless spin no matter what is in it. In a weekend opinion item carried in *The Guardian*, the usually sensible Robert Reich, a former U.S. Labor secretary, suggested the impending report leaves the president trapped and desperate. “So what does a cornered president do?” Reich asked. “For starters, he raises the specter of violence against his political opponents.”

Setting aside such paranoiac hyperbole, Trump’s second thought—publish it all—is the wiser. It is next to impossible that Mueller found hard evidence to support either of the two primary allegations that have driven the special counsel’s investigations.

First and very conspicuously, Mueller’s investigators never consulted those who could have shed light on these assertions. These include Julian Assange, the *WikiLeaks* founder; Christopher Steele, who wrote the now-infamous dossier purporting to establish evidence of Russian collusion, and prominent technical and forensic scientists who have done extensive work on the digital trail left by those responsible for the theft of email from Hillary Clinton’s campaign chairman and the Democratic National Committee.

Second and yet more persuasively, the just-noted technical

and forensic experts have demonstrated that the mail operations in mid-2016 were not hacks – by Russians or anyone else – but leaks executed by someone with access to the Podesta and DNC emails who used a storage device such as a memory key. Mueller’s office has never examined this work in pursuit of alternative evidence in the email case. There is no legitimate justification for this dereliction.

Last week **Consortium News** published the latest [report](#) from Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity, which does its own forensic work while also coordinating with various independent forensic investigators. There are now three layers of evidence indicating that the 2016 mail compromises were an inside job: the speed of the downloads, the manipulation of files to implant Russian “fingerprints,” and – this most recently – the numerical codes on the stolen files, which demonstrate that the probability of a remote hack via the internet is 1-in-2 to the 500th power.

None of those working on the stolen mail’s metadata, including Bill Binney, formerly a technical director at the National Security Agency and the lead scientist at VIPS, has ever been contacted by the special counsel’s investigators. “Nobody wants to talk about evidence,” Binney said by telephone over the weekend. “What Mueller’s doing now is clearing the report of anything that conflicts with the forensics already produced. Given this work has been done, he can’t afford to allege collusion or Russian involvement, so there’ll be nothing substantive in the report about either.”

If Binney is right, the Mueller report will resemble the “Intelligence Community Assessment” published in January

2017. Virtually devoid of evidence, the ICA was more or less fraudulent in its reliance on loosely reasoned inferences and innuendo.

If this proves the outcome after Mueller's two-year effort, we may never know who was responsible for the 2016 email thefts or the role of U.S. law-enforcement and intelligence agencies since then; countless other questions will go unanswered. "The sole objective is to perpetuate 'Russia-gate,'" Binney said last weekend. That will come at a high price when measured by the distortions of our political institutions, our judiciary and our foreign policy priorities.

Patrick Lawrence, a correspondent abroad for many years, chiefly for the *International Herald Tribune*, is a columnist, essayist, author, and lecturer. His most recent book is "Time No Longer: Americans After the American Century" (Yale). Follow him @thefloutist. His web site is www.patricklawrence.us. Support his work via www.patreon.com/thefloutist.

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School Shooters and Drones

Allegra Harpootlian links gun violence at home to U.S. wars abroad.

By [Allegra Harpootlian](#)

[TomDispatch.com](#)



In the wake of the Feb. 14, 2018, mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, which killed 17 students and staff members, a teacher [said](#) the school looked “like a war zone.” And to many young Americans, that’s exactly what it felt like. But this shooting was different. Refusing to be victims, Parkland survivors disrupted the [“thoughts and prayers”](#) cycle by immediately rallying student activists and adults across the country, mobilizing them around such tragedies and the [weapons of war](#) that often facilitate them.

[Recent history](#) suggested that such a movement, sure to be unable to keep the public’s attention or exert significant pressure on lawmakers, would collapse almost instantly. Yet, miraculously enough, the same fear – of their school being next – that had kept young Americans paralyzed for almost 20 years was what drove these newly impassioned activists not to back down.

Let me say that, much as I admire them, I look at their remarkable movement from an odd perspective. You see, I grew up in the “school-shooting era” and now work for a non-profit called [ReThink Media](#) tracking coverage of the American drone war that has been going on for 17 years.

To me, the U.S. military and CIA drones that hover constantly over eight countries across the Greater Middle East and Africa, and regularly terrorize, maim, and kill civilians, including children, are the equivalents of the disturbed shooters in American schools. But that story is hard to find anywhere in this country. What reports Americans do read about those drone strikes usually focus on successes (a major terrorist taken out in a distant land), not the “collateral damage.”

With that in mind, let me return to those teenage activists against gun violence who quickly grasped three crucial things. The first was that such violence can't be dealt with by focusing on gun control alone. You also have to confront the other endemic problems exacerbating the gun violence epidemic, including inadequate mental health resources, systemic racism and police brutality, and the depth of economic inequality. As Parkland teen organizer Edna Chavez explained, “Instead of police officers we should have a department specializing in restorative justice. We need to tackle the root causes of the issues we face and come to an understanding of how to resolve them.”

The second was that, no matter how much you shouted, you had to be aware of the privilege of being heard. In other words, when you shouted, you had to do so not just for yourself but for all those voices so regularly drowned out in this country. After all, black Americans represent the majority of gun homicide victims. Black children are 10 times as likely to die by gun and yet their activism on the subject has been largely demonized or overlooked even as support for the Marjory Stoneman Douglas students rolled

in.

The third was that apathy is the enemy of progress, which means that to make change you have to give people a sense of engagement and empowerment. As one of the Parkland students, [Emma Gonzalez](#), put it: “What matters is that the majority of American people have become complacent in a senseless injustice that occurs all around them.”

Washington’s Expanding Drone Wars

Here’s the irony, though: while those teenagers continue to talk about the repeated killing of innocents in this country, their broader [message](#) could easily be applied to another type of violence that, in all these years, Americans have paid next to no attention to: the U.S. drone war.

Unlike school shootings, drone strikes killing civilians in distant lands rarely make the news here, much less the headlines. Most of us at least now know what it means to live in a country where school shootings are an almost weekly news story. Drones are another matter entirely, and beyond the innocents they so regularly slaughter, there are long-term effects on the communities they are attacking.

As [Veterans for Peace](#) put it, “Here at home, deaths of students and others killed in mass shootings and gun violence, including suicide gun deaths, are said to be the price of freedom to bear arms. Civilian casualties in war are written off as ‘collateral damage,’ the price of freedom and U.S. security.”

And yet, after 17 years, three presidents, and little transparency, America’s drone wars have never truly made it

into the national conversation. Regularly marketed over those years as “precise” and “surgical,” drones have always been seen by lawmakers as a “sexy,” casualty-free solution to fighting the bad guys, while protecting American blood and treasure.

According to reports, President Donald Trump actually expanded the U.S. global drone war, while removing the last shreds of transparency about what those drones are doing – and even who’s launching them. One of his first orders on entering the Oval Office was to secretly reinstate the CIA’s ability to launch drone strikes that are, in most cases, not even officially acknowledged. And since then, it’s only gotten worse. Just last week, he revoked an Obama-era executive order that required the director of national intelligence to release an annual report on civilian and combatant casualties caused by CIA drones and other lethal operations. Now, not only are the rules of engagement – whom you can strike and under what circumstances– secret, but the Pentagon no longer even reveals when drones have been used, no less when civilians die from them. Because of this purposeful opaqueness, even an estimate of the drone death toll no longer exists.

Still, in the data available on all U.S. airstrikes since Trump was elected, an alarming trend is discernible: there are more of them, more casualties from them, and ever less accountability about them. In Iraq and Syria alone, the monitoring group Airwars believes that the U.S.-led coalition against ISIS is responsible for between 7,468 and 11,841 civilian deaths, around 2,000 of whom were children.

(The U.S.-led coalition, however, only admits to killing 1,139 civilians.)

In Afghanistan, the U.N. recently found that U.S. airstrikes (including drone strikes) had killed approximately the same number of Afghan civilians in 2018 as in the previous three years put together. In response to this report, the U.S.-led NATO mission there claimed that “all feasible precautions” were being taken to limit civilian casualties and that it investigates all allegations of their occurrence. According to such NATO investigations, airstrikes by foreign forces caused 117 civilian casualties last year, including 62 deaths – about a fifth of the U.N. tally.

And those are only the numbers for places where Washington is officially at war. In Yemen, Somalia, Pakistan, and Libya, even less information is available on the number of civilians the U.S. has killed. Experts who track drone strikes in such gray areas of conflict, however, place that number in the thousands, though there is no way to confirm them, as even our military acknowledges. U.S. Army Colonel Thomas Veale, a spokesman for the U.S.-led coalition against ISIS, put it this way last year: “As far as how do we know how many civilians were killed, I am just being honest, no one will ever know. Anyone who claims they will know is lying, and there’s no possible way.”

After a U.S. strike killed or injured an entire Afghan family, the trauma surgeon treating a 4-year-old survivor told NBC, “I am sad. A young boy with such big injuries. No eyes, brain out. What will be his future?”

In other words, while America’s teenagers fight in the most

public way possible for their right to live, a world away [Afghanistan's](#) teenagers are [marching](#) for the same thing – except instead of gun control, in that heavily armed land, they want peace.

Trauma Is Trauma Is Trauma

Gun violence – and school shootings in particular – have become the preeminent fear of American teenagers. A [Pew poll](#) taken last year found that 57 percent of teens are worried about a shooting at their school (1-in-4 are “very worried.”) This is even truer of nonwhite teens, with roughly two-thirds of them expressing such fear.

As one student told [Teen Vogue](#): “How could you not feel a little bit terrified knowing that it happens so randomly and so often?” And she’s not exaggerating. More than 150,000 students in the U.S have experienced a shooting on campus since the 1999 Columbine High School massacre, considered the first modern mass school shooting.

And in such anticipatory anxiety, American students have much in common with victims of drone warfare. Speaking to researchers from Stanford University, [Haroon Quddoos](#), a Pakistani taxi driver who survived two U.S. drone strikes, explained it this way:

“No matter what we are doing, that fear is always inculcated in us. Because whether we are driving a car, or we are working on a farm, or we are sitting home playing... cards – no matter what we are doing, we are always thinking the drone will strike us. So we are scared to do anything, no matter what.”

Similar symptoms of post-traumatic stress, trauma, and anxiety are commonplace emotions in countries where U.S. drones are active, just as in American communities like Parkland that have lived through a mass shooting. Visiting communities in Yemen that experienced drone strikes, forensic psychologist Peter Schaapveld found that 92 percent of their inhabitants were suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, with children the most significantly affected. Psychologists have come up with similar figures when studying both survivors of school shootings and children who have been psychologically affected by school-lockdown drills, by the media's focus on violence, and by the culture of fear that has developed in response to mass shootings.

Voices Left Out

The Parkland students have created a coherent movement that brings together an incredibly diverse group united around a common goal and a belief that all gun violence victims, not just those who have experienced a mass shooting, need to be heard. As one Parkland survivor and leader of the March For Our Lives movement, David Hogg, put it, the goal isn't to talk for different communities, but to let them "speak for themselves and ask them how we can help."

The Parkland survivors have essentially created an echo chamber, amplifying the previously unheard voices of young African-Americans and Latinos in particular. At last year's March For Our Lives, for instance, 11-year-old Naomi Wadler started her speech this way: "I am here today to acknowledge and represent the African-American girls whose stories don't make the front page of every national

newspaper, whose stories don't lead the evening news."

In 2016, there were nearly 39,000 gun deaths, more than 14,000 of them homicides and almost 23,000 suicides. Such routine gun violence disproportionately affects black Americans. Mass shootings accounted for only about 1.2 percent of all gun deaths that year. Yet the Parkland students made headlines and gained praise for their activism – Oprah Winfrey even donated \$500,000 to the movement – while black communities that had been fighting gun violence for years never received anything similar.

As someone who spends a lot of her time engrossed in the undercovered news of drone strikes, I can't help but notice the parallels. Stories about U.S. drone strikes taking out dangerous terrorists proliferate, while reports on U.S.-caused civilian casualties disappear into the void. For example, in January, a spokesman for U.S. Central Command claimed that a precision drone strike finally killed Jamel Ahmed Mohammed Ali al-Badawi, the alleged mastermind behind the deadly October 2000 suicide bombing of the *USS Cole* in Yemen. Within a day, more than 24 media outlets had covered the story.

Few, however, focused on the fact that the U.S. command only claimed al-Badawi's death was "likely," despite similar reports about such terrorists that have repeatedly been proven wrong. The British human rights group Reprieve found back in 2014 that even when drone operators end up successfully targeting specific individuals like al-Badawi, they regularly kill vastly more people than their chosen targets. Attempts to kill 41 terror figures, Reprieve reported, resulted in the deaths of an estimated 1,147

people. That was five years ago, but there's no reason to believe anything has changed.

By contrast, when a U.S. airstrike – it's not clear whether it was a drone or a manned aircraft – killed at least 20 civilians in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, in December 2018, only four American media outlets (Reuters, the Associated Press, Voice of America, and The New York Times) covered the story and none followed up with a report on those civilians and their families. That has largely been the norm since the war on terror began with the invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001. In the Trump years so far, while headlines scream about mass school shootings and other slaughters of civilians here, the civilian casualties of America's wars and the drone strikes that often go with them are, if anything, even more strikingly missing in action in the media.

When Safa al-Ahmad, a journalist for PBS's Frontline, was asked why she thought it was important to hear from Yemenis experiencing American drone strikes, she responded:

“I think if you're going to talk about people, you should go talk to them. It's just basic respect for other human beings. It really bothered me that everyone was just talking about the Americans... The other civilians, they weren't given any names, they weren't given any details. It was like an aside to the story... This is part of the struggle when you construct stories on foreign countries, when it comes to the American public. I think we've done [Americans] a disservice, by not doing more of this... We impact the world, we should understand it. An informed public is the only way there can be a functioning democracy. That is our duty as a

democracy, to be informed.”

This one-sided view of America’s never-ending air wars fails everyone, from the people being asked to carry out Washington’s decisions in those lands to ordinary Americans who have little idea what’s being done in their name to the many people living under those drones. Americans should know that, to them, it’s we who seem like the school shooters of the planet.

Waking Up an Apathetic Nation

For the better part of two decades, young Americans have been trapped in a cycle of violence at home and abroad with little way to speak out. Gun violence in this country was a headline-grabbing given. School shootings, like so many other mass killings here, were deemed “tragic” and worthy of thoughts, prayers, and much fervid media attention, but little else.

Until Parkland.

What changed? Well, a new cohort, Generation Z, came on the scene and, unlike their millennial predecessors, many of them are refusing to accept the status quo, especially when it comes to issues like gun violence.

Every time there was a mass shooting, millennials would hold their breath, wondering if today would be the day the country finally woke up. After Newtown. After San Bernadino. After Las Vegas. And each time, it wasn’t. Parkland could have been the same, if it hadn’t been for those meddling kids. Having witnessed the dangers of apathy, Gen-Z seems increasingly to be about movement and action. In fact,

in a Vice youth survey, 71 percent of respondents reported feeling “capable” of enacting change around global warming and 85 percent felt the same about social problems. And that’s new.

For so long, gun violence seemed like an unstoppable, incurable plague. Fed up with the “adults in the room,” however, these young activists have begun to take matters into their own hands, giving those particularly at risk of gun violence, children, a sense of newfound power – the power to determine their own futures. Whether it’s testifying in front of Congress in the first hearing on gun violence since 2011, protesting at the stores and offices of gun manufacturers, or participating in “die-ins,” these kids are making their voices heard.

Since the Parkland massacre, there has been actual movement on gun control, something that America has not seen for a long time. Under pressure, the Justice Department moved to ban the bump stocks that can make semi-automatic weapons fire almost like machine guns, Florida signed a \$400 million bill to tighten the state’s gun laws, companies began to cut ties with the National Rifle Association, and public support grew for stricter gun control laws.

Although the new Gen Z activists have focused on issues close to home, sooner or later they may start to look beyond the water’s edge and find themselves in touch with their counterparts across the globe, who are showing every day how dedicated they are to changing the world they live in, with or without anyone’s help. And if they do, they will find that, in its endless wars, America has been the true

school shooter on this planet, terrorizing the global classroom with a remarkable lack of consequences.

In March 2018, [according to](#) Human Rights Watch, American planes bombed a school that housed displaced people in Syria, killing dozens of them, including children. Similarly, in Yemen that August, a Saudi plane, using a [Pentagon-supplied](#) laser-guided bomb, blew away a school bus, killing 40 schoolchildren. Just as at home, it's not only about the weaponry like those planes or drones. Activists will find that they have to focus their attention as well on the root causes of such violence and the scars they leave behind in the communities of survivors.

More tolerant, more [diverse](#), less trustful of major institutions and less inclined to believe in American exceptionalism than any generation before them, Generation Z may be primed to care about what their country is doing in their name from Afghanistan to Syria, Yemen to Libya. But first they have to know it's happening.

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THE ANGRY ARAB: Why Ilhan Omar is a

Dangerous Woman for the US

Washington doesn't like its Muslims or Arabs to take pride in their heritage or oppose the Israeli occupation, writes As'ad AbuKhalil.

By **As`ad AbuKhalil**

Special to Consortium News



Washington was not expecting the arrival of Reps. Ilhan Omar or Rashida Tlaib. The nation's capital has seen Arabs and Muslims before but they were not like these two new assertive and defiant members of Congress.

The White House, under Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama, hosted Iftar dinners for Ramadan and invited a variety of Muslims (including of course the Israeli ambassador because he is wildly popular among the world's Muslims), but they were of a different brand. The Bush administration even employed Muslim Arabs or Muslim-born Americans who preached Bush's doctrine to anyone who would listen in the Middle East.

But those were different Arabs. They were the "non-threatening" Arabs who made Westerners feel comfortable in their racism and bigotry. The Arabs who are welcomed in the halls of Congress are usually mimics of the late president of Egypt, Anwar Sadat, and the current king of Jordan. They are the type of Arabs who praise Western wars and downplay Arab anger at the long record of Israeli occupation and aggression.

Some of those Arabs in D.C. are employed as correspondents

for Gulf-regime media. Some had even received their training at the research arm of the Israeli lobby, while others work for racist Congress people. They are the kind of Arabs who are paraded before Western audiences to show them that there are Muslim Arabs who are exceptions: the ones who are willing to insult other Arabs and Muslims, and who tell tales about how they were saved from the terrorism of the religion or the culture of the region.

But Minnesota's Ilhan Omar and Michigan's Rashida Tlaib are different. The Muslims whom Washington has been used to receiving from Lebanon or from Gulf embassies are Muslims who are embarrassed about their religion and about their culture. They are the Muslims who apologize day and night for the terrorism of Muslims, as if all Muslims are responsible for the crimes of the few. (The blaming of all Jews for the crimes of Israel is certainly anti-Semitic—just as the blaming of all Muslims for the crimes of the few Muslims is Islamophobic.)

Ilhan Omar, from the second she entered Congress, has made her audience feel uncomfortable, and the press has had a hard time dealing with her.

Acceptable Extremism

Acceptable and subservient Muslims or Arabs are allowed to hold extremist views and to express hatred and hostility to Jewish people as long as they don't offend Israel or Western governments. Anwar Sadat's background as an anti-Semitic Nazi was never an issue for Israel or Western Zionists. In fact, Stuart Eizenstat, Jimmy Carter's domestic policy advisor, downplays the Nazi sympathy of Sadat and attributes

it dismissively to anti-British sentiments, in his recent book, “President Carter.”

And when Mahmoud Abbas, the president of Palestine, agreed after the assassination of Yasser Arafat to serve Israeli occupation interests, his anti-Semitic past (his PhD dissertation in Moscow contained Holocaust denial) was also forgiven. The Saudi regime, the largest-by far-purveyor of anti-Semitic propaganda among Muslims in the last century is also forgiven.

It is not about anti-Semitism, as evidenced by Israeli alliances with evangelical Christians and European far-right groups. Zionists object to anti-Semitism—real or concocted as is the case with Omar—when there is criticism of Israel and calls for boycott, divestment and sanctions on Israel, or BDS.

Ilhan Omar also doesn't look the part. Westerners prefer whiskey-drinking Muslims who are willing to mock fellow Muslims, and who are willing to denigrate Palestinian political aspirations for the amusement of the Zionist think-tank crowd in D.C.

And what is rarely mentioned about Ilhan Omar is that she wears the veil. At least in France, where Islamophobia has become the national secular religion of the republic, the hostility to the veil has become unmasked at all points of the political spectrum, left, right and center.

Hostility to the veil has been less vocally expressed in D.C. (veiled Muslim women have numerous stories of harassment and abuse to tell). But Congress had to change its rules to allow Omar to wear the veil under its roof,

even though exceptions to the longstanding hat ban had reportedly been made for the wearing of yarmulkes.

It would have been less irksome for Omar's haters if she did not wear the veil. Westerners prefer Muslims to be atheists or non-practicing Muslims. (In the second teaching position I held at Tufts University, the most senior member of the department of political science once rushed to my office and asked me hurriedly: "You are not Muslim, are you?" I said: "Well, I am from a Muslim family but I am personally an atheist." He said: "Oh, that is good," and left.)

Unacceptable Candor

And Omar speaks in a refreshingly candid language that does not stick to the rhetorical clichés of D.C. politicians.

By contrast, New York's Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has learned to censor herself. Ever since she was attacked for previous remarks she had made about Palestinians, Ocasio-Cortez has resorted to speaking in the vague generalities that U.S. diplomats also use to avoid the wrath of Israel and its supporters. She no longer seems to even utter the word Palestine. She has become too aware of the price to be paid.

Omar and Rashida Tlaib have also supported BDS, which is the biggest sin, as far as Israel and AIPAC are concerned. The U.S. has made it very clear that BDS has emerged as the second danger to Israel after the threat of military resistance to Israeli occupation and aggression.

The endorsement of BDS by two members of Congress bestows official legitimacy on a movement that Israel has been

desperately trying to paint as an anti-Semitic reincarnation of Nazism. But this has been the history of Israeli propaganda: all enemies of Israel, communists, Arab nationalists, Palestinian nationalists, rightists, leftists, have been labeled as anti-Semitic. Even the secular Arab nationalist leader, the late Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt, was accused of anti-Semitism by Israel when none of his speeches ever contained an anti-Semitic word.

And now, the U.S. Congress, which sat silent about the wave of Islamophobia unleashed during and after the Trump campaign, suddenly sees the need to issue a proclamation against religious bigotry and racism.

It is a bitter irony that the U.S. Congress has, for the first time, condemned Islamophobia in a statement widely understood to be an attempt to discipline the first Muslim American female member of Congress. The resolution had nothing to do with ostensible congressional outrage against Islamophobia. (Since Sept. 11, many members of Congress have become vocal anti-Islam bigots, as is U.S. President Donald Trump, who advocated a ban on all Muslim visitors to the country). The reference to Islamophobia was added to appease those new progressive members of Congress and the African American members who protested against a very selective standard of outrage.

Weeks after Omar's election to Congress, the Zionist lobby succeeded in turning her into a caricature. They inserted the word "Jewish" every time she spoke against support for Israel (she did not once refer to Jews in her discourse about Israel and its supporters).

The word “trope” is now a convenient tool to turn someone’s criticisms of Israel into grotesque anti-Semitic hatred. Even the progressive Michele Goldberg, one of the few refreshingly courageous columnists in *The New York Times*, insisted that Omar resorted to anti-Semitic “tropes.”

The Israeli lobby and the government want to send a clear message through the mistreatment and abuse of Ilhan Omar: that progressive members of Congress, especially if they are Muslim Arab women of color, won’t be allowed to express their views on Israel without mobilizing the entire AIPAC machinery in Congress against them.

Ilhan Omar is indeed dangerous. She has broken taboos, along with her colleague Rashida Tlaib. She is dangerous to the hegemony imposed on the nation’s capital by the supporters of Israel (and evangelical Christian, not Jews, are now the most fanatical Zionists in U.S. politics). Because Omar is seen as dangerous, the abuse won’t end. It has just started.

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Joe Biden on the Relaunch Pad

Whether Biden can win the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination will largely depend on how little voters know about his actual record, writes Norman Solomon.

Biden is No Friend of the Working Class; Solidly Backed Invasion of Iraq in 2003

By Norman Solomon



When *The New York Times* front-paged its latest anti-left polemic masquerading as a news article, the March 9 piece declared: “Should former Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. enter the race, as his top advisers vow he soon will, he would have the best immediate shot at the moderate mantle.”

On the verge of relaunching, Biden is poised to come to the rescue of the corporate political establishment – at a time when, in the words of the *Times*, “the sharp left turn in the Democratic Party and the rise of progressive presidential candidates are unnerving moderate Democrats.” After 36 years

in the Senate and eight as vice president, Biden is by far the most seasoned servant of corporate power with a prayer of becoming the next president.

When Biden read this paragraph in a recent *Politico* [article](#), his ears must have been burning: “Early support from deep-pocketed financial executives could give Democrats seeking to break out of the pack an important fundraising boost. But any association with bankers also opens presidential hopefuls to sharp attacks from an ascendant left.”

The direct prey of Biden’s five-decade “association with bankers” include millions of current and former college students now struggling under avalanches of debt; they can thank Biden for his prodigious services to the lending industry. Andrew Cockburn identifies an array of victims in his [devastating profile](#) of Biden in the March issue of *Harper’s* magazine. For instance:

- “Biden was long a willing foot soldier in the campaign to emasculate laws allowing debtors relief from loans they cannot repay. As far back as 1978, he helped negotiate a deal rolling back bankruptcy protections for graduates with federal student loans, and in 1984 worked to do the same for borrowers with loans for vocational schools.”
- “Even when the ostensible objective lay elsewhere, such as drug-related crime, Biden did not forget his banker friends. Thus the 1990 Crime Control Act, with Biden as chief sponsor, further limited debtors’ ability to take advantage of bankruptcy protections.”
- Biden worked diligently to strengthen the hand of credit-card firms against consumers. At the same time,

“the credit card giant MBNA was Biden’s largest contributor for much of his Senate career, while also employing his son Hunter as an executive and, later, as a well-remunerated consultant.”

Media mythology about “Lunch Bucket Joe” cannot stand up to scrutiny. His bona fides as a pal of working people are about as solid and believable as those of the last Democratic nominee for president.

But Biden’s fealty to corporate power has been only one aspect of his many-faceted record that progressives will widely find repugnant to the extent they learn about it.

Since the #MeToo movement began, some retrospective media coverage has assessed Biden’s highly problematic role in chairing the Clarence Thomas–Anita Hill hearings of the Senate Judiciary Committee. And in recent days, *Washington Post* reporting has brought into focus his backstory of pandering to white racism against African-Americans during much of his Senate career.

It Doesn’t Matter

As a 32-year-old senator in 1975, Biden commented: “I do not buy the concept, popular in the ’60s, which said, ‘We have suppressed the black man for 300 years and the white man is now far ahead in the race for everything our society offers. In order to even the score, we must now give the black man a head start, or even hold the white man back, to even the race.’ I don’t buy that.”

More attention is also needed to Biden’s role as Judiciary Committee chair pushing through the now-notorious landmark

1994 crime bill. In the process of championing the bill, Biden warned of “predators on our streets” during a 1993 speech on the Senate floor.

“It doesn’t matter whether or not they were deprived as a youth,” Biden proclaimed. “It doesn’t matter whether or not they had no background that enabled them to become socialized into the fabric of society. It doesn’t matter whether or not they’re the victims of society. The end result is they’re about to knock my mother on the head with a lead pipe, shoot my sister, beat up my wife, take on my sons.”

Now, a new Iowa poll shows Biden and Bernie Sanders neck and neck in the first-in-the-nation contest for the nomination, with the rest of the candidates far behind in the state. For quite a while, Biden has been sharpening his hatchet to swing at progressive populism in general – and Bernie in particular.

In typical Biden style, the former vice president is eager to stake out the middle of the road, between ultra-predatory capitalism and solidarity with working-class people. At an October 2017 gathering in Alabama, he said: “Guys, the wealthy are as patriotic as the poor. I know Bernie doesn’t like me saying that, but they are.” Later, Biden elaborated on the theme when he told an audience at the Brookings Institution, “I don’t think five hundred billionaires are the reason we’re in trouble. The folks at the top aren’t bad guys.”

As Branko Marcetic pointed out in *Jacobin* last summer, “at a time when left-wing populism is increasingly accepted as the

antidote to Trump and the GOP's nativist and corporate-friendly pitch, Biden stands as a remnant of precisely the sort of left-averse, triangulating Democratic politics that Hillary Clinton was relentlessly criticized for personifying."

Biden makes clear his distaste for the current progressive populist wave. "I know some want to single out big corporations for all the blame," he wrote in a [blog post](#). "It is true that the balance has shifted too much in favor of corporations and against workers. But consumers, workers, and leaders have the power to hold every corporation to a higher standard, not simply cast business as the enemy or let industry off the hook."

Supports the Business of War

One of the many industries that Biden has a long record of letting "off the hook" is the war business. In that mode, Biden did more than any other Democratic senator to greenlight the March 2003 invasion of Iraq.

It wasn't just that Biden voted for the Iraq war on the Senate floor five months before it began. During the lead-up to that vote, in August 2002, as chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, he presided over sham hearings – refusing to allow experts who opposed an invasion to get any words in edgewise – while a cavalcade of war hawks testified in the national spotlight.

"It is difficult to over-estimate the critical role Biden played in making the tragedy of the Iraq war possible," Middle East studies professor Stephen Zunes [wrote](#). "More than two months prior to the 2002 war resolution even being

introduced, in what was widely interpreted as the first sign that Congress would endorse a U.S. invasion of Iraq, Biden declared on August 4 that the United States was probably going to war. In his powerful position as chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, he orchestrated a propaganda show designed to sell the war to skeptical colleagues and the America public by ensuring that dissenting voices would not get a fair hearing.”

Joe Biden’s friendly TV persona appeals to many. He smiles well and has a gift of gab. Most political journalists in the mass media like him. He’s an apt frontrunner for the military-industry complex and the corporate power structure that it serves. Whether Biden can win the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination will largely depend on how many voters don’t know much about his actual record.

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